Role Playing Encyclopedia Article

Role Playing

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Role Playing

The act of putting oneself in another person's position in an attempt to see his or her point of view in a situation.

Also referred to as role taking or perspective taking.

In role playing, participants take the position of someone else to "act" the part of that person in a particular situation. Parents, teachers, and therapists all use role playing in varying degrees of formality to help a child develop empathy. Children often benefit from trying to see a situation from the point of view of someone else, such as a friend or sibling, especially when involved in an argument or conflict.

Even infants appear to be capable of empathy and simple perspective taking. When an infant observes another infant or family member display outward signs of being upset or hurt, the infant often mirrors those emotions, becoming distressed also. Within the first year of life, infants are able to practice taking turns for short periods with parent, sibling, or caretaker. Many researchers feel that the infant's ability to share feelings and empathize is evidence that these social behaviors are innate rather than learned. Researchers who have studied brain functioning and the family history of people with severe social behavior deficits seems to confirm this view.

Teachers often use role playing or perspective taking in discussing literature. Even the youngest students and beginning readers can examine picture-book characters' facial expressions in order to express empathy. Older readers can discuss a character's motive and attempt to understand the situation from that character's point of view. Psychodrama, a technique used in group therapy, involves reenacting life situations with different people taking the roles of the participants. With the guidance of a therapist, individuals participating in psychodrama, a formalized form of role playing, may gain insights into others' feelings, or into their own responses to the behavior of others.

For Further Study

Books

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